

THE RAFT
IS NOT
THE SHORE



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Towards a world where
spirituality and politics meet

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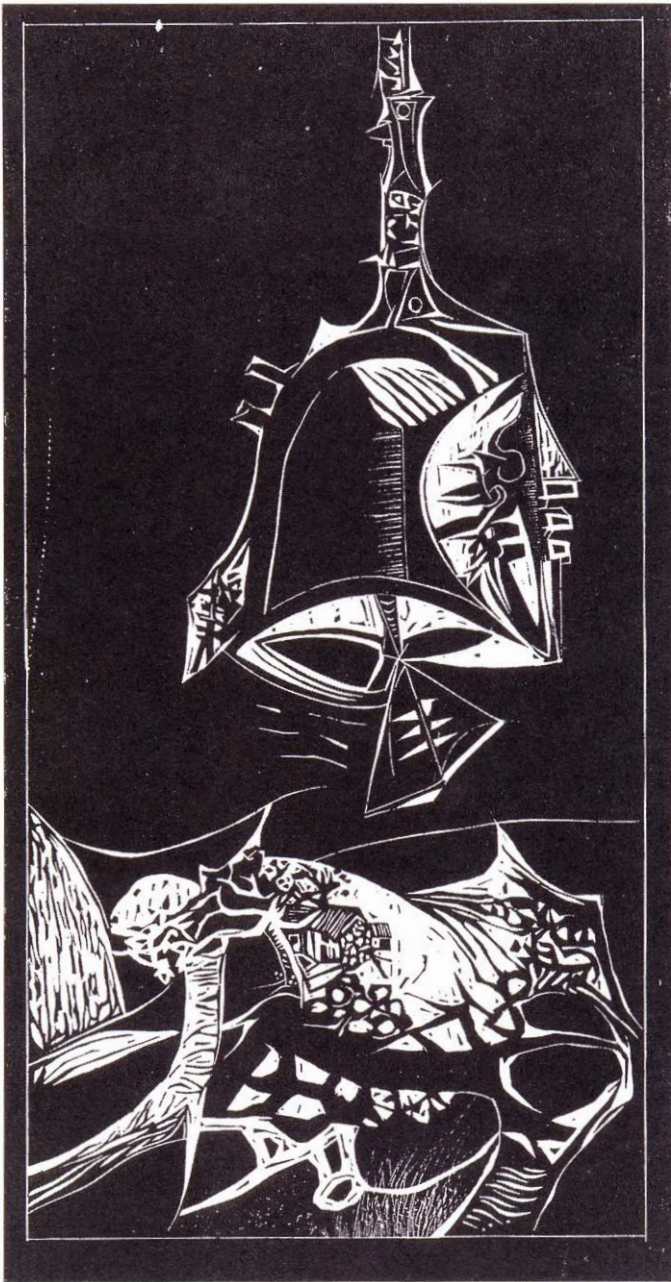


ONE

MEMORY, EUCHARIST, DEATH

BERRIGAN: The notion of remembrance has always been fascinating to me. People seldom think of the memory as a creative power—one that brings together different senses of time, or keeps one from merely floating around and ricocheting off other people and events. As a surgeon would, we “re-member” an amputee or a broken body or a skeleton. It means that we put broken lives together, into one body. The ability also to draw upon the future, to re-member the future, is, it seems to me, a very rich notion; so many people have the idea that memory is merely dredging up the past. And, especially in the sense of affliction, a down-putting, the memory of past wrong, of death, of separation of families, of personal humiliations. Few people have their lives so articulated that memory can gaze on the future with equanimity, simply because their present is quite intense and quite—even quite joyous.

This idea struck me in thinking about Martin Luther King and his attitude toward his own people. Even though there were the bitterest memories of bondage and enslavement, the people could arise and create a human future in the midst of their oppression. In some mysterious way the bitter and unpromising past had been transformed into a vision—a vision of an entirely new future. And the most stunning fact of all was that the struggle—the exodus as the Bible says—



also included the keeper, the slave master. He was never left behind.

The same exodus, of course, had to be seen in an entirely different light by whites. The question for King was, How do we cease being slaves? But the question for whites is, How do we cease being slave masters? It's easy to see one form of enslavement if one has experienced it; but it's very difficult to see the other, you know? The possessors of the earth, at least according to the Bible, very seldom change. It's a greater miracle than when the sinner repents or one of the lepers is healed or when the blind are given sight. We don't hear that many of the Jewish Sanhedrin or Roman curia or that a Pilate are converted or attain a new vision or illumination. Literally, they seem in the Bible to have no future; the future always belongs to the remnant which has come out of slavery. These are very disturbing messages about consciousness.

NHAT HANH: I wasn't thinking of the same meaning of the word *re-member*. In French they have the word *recueillement* to describe the attitude of someone trying to be himself, not to be dispersed, one member of the body here, another there. One tries to recover, to be once more in good shape, to become whole again.

And I think that is the beginning of awakening. People speak about sudden enlightenment. It is not something very difficult to understand; each of us has undergone that kind of experience in our own life, several times in our own life. The distance separating forgetfulness, ignorance, and enlightenment—that distance is short; it is so short that it is no distance at all. One may be ignorant now, but he can be enlightened in the next second. The recovering of oneself can be realized in just one portion of one second. And to be aware of who we are, what we are, what we are doing, what we are thinking, seems to be a very easy thing to do—and yet it is the most important thing: *se recueillir*—the starting point of the salvation of oneself.

One time I meditated on the meaning of the Eucharist. Suddenly I found that message of Jesus so clear. The disciples had been following Him and had seen Him, had the chance to look at Him, to look in His eyes, to see Him smile, to see Him in reality. But it seems to me that they were not capable of being in real contact with that marvelous reality. Then He broke bread and poured the wine and said, “This is My flesh, My blood. Drink it, take it, eat it, and you will have life eternal.” I think the message is so clear, so clear to a Buddhist monk. We eat a lot, we drink a lot; but what do we eat? We eat phantoms; we drink ghosts. We don’t eat real bread—reality. We don’t drink real wine. But if Jesus said, “This is My flesh, this is My blood,” it’s a very drastic way of awakening man from forgetfulness, from ignorance.

So, I think, when you perform the rite of Eucharist, you have a role that is very similar to the act of Jesus. Your role is to bring back life and reality to a community that is participating in the worship. There have been times when I was not able to see that awakening happening in the Eucharist. Then I said, “There must be something wrong. It’s not because you perform the correct act and say the correct words that a miracle happens. No. You have to be able to awaken reality, to bring back reality. And that depends on who you are as a person, depends on your being *life*.”

One time I spoke at a Buddhist meeting; I said, “In order to save the world, each of us has to build a pagoda.”

BERRIGAN: To build a pagoda?

NHAT HANH: Yes. To build a pagoda. There were people who thought that I was urging them to build more pagodas so Buddhism would become a national religion. But this pagoda cannot be built by stones and sticks and things like that, because this pagoda is a sanctuary where you have a chance to be alone and to face yourself, the reality of yourself. If you don’t have a pagoda

like that to go into each day, several times each day, then you cannot protect the Eucharist, you cannot protect yourself, and you cannot protect the world from destruction. You were saying?

BERRIGAN: The Eucharist brings to mind the death of Jesus. We are talking during Holy Week, and one question keeps haunting us. How did this man live; how did He die?

The Gospels seem to hint that He knew what was coming—that He went into it freely, beginning with that anguished episode in Gethsemane. John is quite remote and spiritualized in his descriptions. Luke, being a physician as the tradition said, was close to the physical aspects. He is the only one of the evangelists who gives such a detail as the sweat of blood. This is evidently connected with His submitting to and overcoming the fear of death—death by anticipation.

John seems to say that Jesus saw the other side of death, while Luke stresses the agony involved in death itself. So Luke tells us He sweated blood; and John says He met some pilgrims and told a parable. You have almost a loss of control on one side and complete control on the other. Luke says His sweat came down like blood, like drops of blood. And John says that in the midst of His struggle He held a quiet discussion, speaking to some gentiles about a grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying and then rising again—as though He was indeed talking about Himself.

I think that in both instances we have a rush of anguish—the agony of the person who has lost everything, but still must lose himself. There's no doubt that Jesus lived as though possessions were not entities with a life of their own, but were objects, were instrumental. He walked through a great many of them, enjoying them, using them, but never really attached them to Himself, like a string of tin cans. Life itself was something else. At the end of His life came a great fear of death, as though to say to us that anyone who loves life deeply enters into the injustice and violence of undeserved death with dread—dread for the loss of his bodily

integrity, his whole sense of the world. One's own life is that last and dearest possession of all. And now He must go; life itself must be given up. This rhythm of agony recurs three times: Luke says Jesus prays and looks for help, goes back to pray and looks for help, and then prays. Then He walks to His captors.

|| *“Maybe you have the realization that if one doesn't know how to die, then he doesn't know how to live either.”*

My brief experience in prison included death—a rehearsal of death.* You could not come out of this experience unchanged, I think, unless you were very heedless while you went through it. But, it's interesting; we're never told in the New Testament not to fear death. Nor are we even told that fear of death is unnatural; maybe that's a better way of putting it. But we're always told that there is a greater encounter for us, a counter-poise to fear. I think that the hint is always there that actuality is much less fearful than fear itself. In prison, I found, when I nearly died one day, that suddenly knowing I was dying was a very quiet and simple moment; and there was no fear.

NHAT HANH: Maybe because, at that moment, there is an awareness that what you have thought of as death is not death. And maybe you have the realization that if one doesn't know how to die, then he doesn't know how to live either. It seems to me that in the Christian scriptures we can distinguish two kinds of death. The first kind of death I would propose that we write with a small “d.” It is part of life; without it there is no life. The other kind of Death is in contrast to life; it is real Death.

* While in prison in 1971 Berrigan nearly died as a result of massive allergic shock triggered by routine dental work.

So dying, as many of us experience, is just a form of living. It is not difficult for us to see that if there is no death, then life cannot be possible. Life is a process of change, and change brings birth and death. How can there be birth if death does not exist?

To speak from the standpoint of Buddhist scriptures, ours is a doctrine of *emptiness*. But emptiness is not annihilation or anything like that; emptiness is a means of perceiving the nature of reality. In the *Heart Sutra*, a text which we read several times every day, it is said that after we have perceived the emptiness of things, we can overcome all kinds of fear and suffering, including the fear of death. Our meditation on the emptiness of things is to help us see, to realize the close relationship between phenomena. Life is a phenomenon, death is a phenomenon, and both together are life. And that is why when one has seen the real nature of things, he will acquire a kind of fearlessness—an attitude of calm—because he knows his death will bring no end to life. He knows too that his existence does not depend on his “being alive” now. So the existence of reality transcends both what we call life and death. Only the lack of awakening, the lack of awareness of reality, might be called real Death. But once you are awake to realities, what we usually call death is only part of life.

BERRIGAN: Yes, yes. While you spoke I was reminded of our scriptures, especially of the attitude of Jesus toward death, according to John’s Gospel. John uses the word *death* remarkably few times; and as far as I can recall the word is never used by Jesus in speaking of Himself. He always uses a kind of paraphrase for that word. Maybe because there are so many things that the word *death* blocks off, because it has the popular notion of extinction or the notion of personified reality or of a malignant power at large in the world. Men pay tribute to it, make an idol of it. But Jesus uses phrases like, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all things to Myself”; or, “I will go to the Father”; or, “I pass out of this world to the Father.” In the Greek text there’s a play on the word

pass, the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word *Pasch*. The paschal mystery is the passage out of slavery, out of Egypt. It's almost as though He's saying, "If I pass out of Egypt into freedom, that's My notion of death." It's a remarkably rich kind of imagery, meant, I think, to cut off brutally and suddenly our age-old tribute to death, which the world is always exacting—and is always paying too, because to exact is to pay.

In Paul's letters the notion of death is also very powerful and dramatic. "If death abounds, then life abounds more fully"—you know the two are in contest. The other writers treat the death of Jesus gently, biologically even. From an apologetic point of view, they are anxious to convey that Jesus really underwent this: that His soul left His body, that He truly became one with the inert world and then arose, that there's no fraud, that He truly died.

I think it's a very interesting balance for John to say, "Death has not much power over us"; and for the others to say, "Yes, but we really die." Do you know what I mean? Jesus died. And the interception of this cruel cycle doesn't begin until He submits. He says, "Into Thy hands I commend My spirit." And then He expires. Only then does the Father intervene—afterward. But He does not intervene to save Jesus from death: "No, no, let it all go. Let it happen."

NHAT HANH: In ancient Buddhist monastic circles they used to speak of *the most important problem*: the problem of life and death. And it was often reported that the monk who was enlightened most of the time just smiled, as if he were someone who had been searching for something and had suddenly found that he had not lost that something—it was in his pocket all the time.

Many treatises were written, dealing with death. They say before you die, you do not die; while you are alive, death does not exist; and after you die, death does not exist either. Before death, there is no death; and after death there is no death. Something like that. It's nice!

BERRIGAN: I remember once Merton* discussing this question of death with the novices. He spoke with joy, almost with anticipation, of death. He said the only thing that relieved the life of a monk from absolute absurdity was that his life was a joyful conquest of death. And that life made sense only because the monk had conquered death. He was living apart from a world which paid death such tribute—racist, violent, militaristic—a kind of taxation exacted on people by death itself. You could sense in the words and the way he spoke and the lightness of his tone that he had made it—that he had really conquered this thing.

His death followed shortly. And while it was heartbreaking for his friends, it was beautiful to hear him facing it in that spirit. So, I think for us it is a great joy, a great privilege, to live a life of faith in which the possibility of the conquest of death is in our midst everyday. I have the impression that Merton was able to create that spirit among the younger monks. There was an enlightenment in his habitual attitude toward people, toward fame, toward—I don't know—whatever the opposite of idolatries is. He had a true sense of God and the world, and I think people came from him with a sense of the possibilities which life held—enlightenment maybe. I think this was because he had gotten rid of so much death in his own makeup.

|| *“In the pursuit of life, we are always dealing out death.”*

NHAT HANH: I think it is possible to say that eternal life is the kind of life that includes death. In fact, eternal life without

* Thomas Merton, who died in 1968, was an American Trappist monk, a popular spiritual writer, and a prophetic critic of the Vietnam War. He was a close friend of both authors.

death is not possible. For example, you have a coin, a piece of money. You have two sides, and one side is the opposite of the other. But this side is not the coin. The other side is not the coin either. The coin is both. So in talking of eternal life as the coin, noneternal life is just one face of the two sides. Once you choose eternal life you choose death as well, and both are life. But if you want to take only one face of the coin, you don't have the coin.

BERRIGAN: In the States, so much of what we call daily life, human life, is concerned with death in a fashion that's very peculiar. For instance, we have all kinds of "wars" declared against this or that aspect of death. We have a war on poverty, a war on cancer, a war on heart disease. There's even a war on war. These aspects of death around us, within us, are always conceived of as the great enemy which must be overcome so that we can get beyond disease, war, poverty—into what they like to think of as the good life, the real life, the life which has no death within it. And this dream continues. But it's always a kind of troubled and violent dream because it implies (and sometimes says openly) that, in order to make that leap, we have to make war on something or on somebody. To attain anything like the truth of life, or a life with others, something is always in our way; and must be done away with, must be overcome.

Of course the fact is that the culture is almost totally bankrupt of a vision of what a good life might be. We're ridden by consumerism, fear, violence, racism—all these terrible mythologies which forever put off any real vision. I find it interesting in the light of scripture that, while the dream of the good life is forever delayed, death is always magnified: omnipresent, omnivorous, the shadowy other, the enemy. So we never really pay tribute to life at all, and never arrive at life. What we're really doing all the time is paying tribute to death. The eventuality of life is put off and put off and put off, because the obstacles and enemies multiply like piranhas, forever.

Until the end of history we'll be waging a shadow war. The shadows are created by our own psyche in the image of death. In this itch for beatitude, which has nothing to do with God or our neighbor—in order to get nearer to that, we must kill all the time. In the pursuit of life, we are always dealing out death. War becomes the continual occupation and preoccupation in the minds of people who are purportedly trying to get to a better life.

Speaking in biblical terms, God is superseded by the ape of God, which is actually personified death. This is the shrine at which we worship. This, I think, is the practical consequence of our war on life. Our real shrines are nuclear installations and the Pentagon and the war research laboratories. This is where we worship, allowing ourselves to hear the obscene command that we kill and be killed. A command which, it seems to me, is anti-Christ, is anti-God, you know.

Someday you must take a trip into the countryside of North Dakota, just south of the Canadian border. It's all prairie; it's all flat. And for miles and miles on the horizon, the only visible thing is a nuclear installation, shaped like a pyramid. Most of it, of course, is subterranean. Someone told me that in Egypt the construction of the pyramids began just before the downfall of a dynasty. It was that kind of sarcophagus, that kind of a shrine to death, which they raised as an admission that they were dying. Someone said that if North Dakota seceded from the Union, it would be the third nuclear power. And this is a farming state.

NHAT HANH: So, war becomes the only possibility. During the periods when the war was very intensive in Vietnam, most of us meditated on death every day, because death was a matter of every second, every minute.

In that atmosphere, there was pressure on each one of us to work more quickly, to break through the problems of life and death. On one hand, we were pushed by the need to bring

help to the suffering. You had to bury the dead and help the mutilated children, and often we were busy building shelters for others. You had to be busy all the time doing these things. But your mind was always on problems of life and death.

If death came and you were not prepared, you would not be able to take it well. But there was another stimulus and others acted quite differently. They said, “Well, you don’t know when you’ll die, so if you have some money why not spend it?” That was another attitude, since the future was so insecure.

My Master died during the 1968 Tet offensive, but not from a bomb or a bullet. He couldn’t stand it. He just couldn’t stand it. He was old—eighty-five.

BERRIGAN: He couldn’t stand—the war? The assaults on the monastery?

NHAT HANH: The monastery was struck by one mortar shell; but no one was killed. At that time I was not in the country; I did not have the opportunity to see him before he died.

I remember quite well what he said when I was a novice. It was a long time ago, during the French occupation. We had rice for the monks, and we had to bury the rice in order to preserve it because French soldiers came and stole it from us. We put it in big containers and buried them in the yard. One day he and a few of us novices went out to the yard to unearth one can of rice for dinner. The Master was old, but he still followed our tradition that every monk works: “no work, no food.” He said to us while he worked, “I’m so tired. Let’s wait until after I die.” We Vietnamese say, “Well, just wait until I’m dead, I won’t be tired anymore.” He was joking with us; all of us were sweating because of the hard work. I thought it was only a joke but half a minute later he said to us, “Who will be the person after I am dead? Who will be the person who will not be tired?”

I was struck by that and I took it as a theme of meditation. It helped me a lot. I realized that it is by watching the Master,

his way of living and listening, that you find the things that are useful for your own work. It's not by studying the scriptures hours and hours with explanations of a professor that you find those things. Now he's no more. He's no longer there, and I am supposed to succeed him. But since I am here, another disciple is in charge of the monastery.

BERRIGAN: We thank God you're here. And since it's the anniversary of Holy Thursday this week, maybe we can all celebrate the Eucharist. It would be marvelous.

NHAT HANH: Sure. We'll make some bread.